

## [The Belks]

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Subject: The Belks and Grandpa Payne

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### THE BELKS

John Belk and Martha Payne were married December 22, 1915, in Charlotte, N. C. John was a tall lanky boy of nineteen, but because he hadn't the money to buy clothes he was wearing someone's cast off knee breeches. A clerk at the bureau refused to issue a license to "a kid in short pants," so he had to go back to Paw Creek and borrow money from an uncle to get some long pants so he could be married.

Already he had been in the mill four years. Now, after 27 years of it, he is bitter at being "caught" by the mill, and that his children have been caught the same way. "Onct you get in it ...." he says, then stops, wordless.

"My Dad, by rights, shoulda had sump'n. You see, him and his two brothers was lef' orphans when Grandpa Julius Belk died back in 1869. Grandpa owned a nice big farm over there in Union County near Monroe, where he'd lived and gotten 'long fine. But you know how it was 'long about that time right after the War. Well, his brother, Big Alf, just stepped in to finish raising the kids—and took the farm for doin' it. The kids never got

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nothin'. Why, when my Dad married he didn't get so much as one mule to start off with. He had to go out and rent him a little farm and start off from scratch. C9 - [?]/[?]/[?] - N.C.

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"To make it worse, my Ma had been married before and she already had three children. My brother and two sisters and me come along pretty fast and so the folks had a houseful. Things was awful hard. It might not'a been so hard if Dad'd had anything to start with, but as it was he had feed, stock, implements, rent, and ever'thing else to pay for and it was more'n he was able to make.

"Why, I can still remember them days back there. Speshly the winters. We lived in a ole barn-like house and the snow use-ta beat in through the cracks and make long riffly drif's acrost the bare floor. One night I was careless enough to leave my ole brass-toed brogans too near the wall and woke up next mornin' to find 'em full-up with snow. Hard times? Why, many a time I've walked two miles to the gen'ral store and swapped a dozen eggs and a penny for a nickel box of snuff!

"Dad, he struggled 'long for years tryin' to make a go of it, and Ma wasn't any too well satisfied. She wasn't used to hard times. She was the daughter of Sam Baucom, a blacksmith over on Rocky River, and if you've ever been in them parts you'll know that most ever'body that is anybody is name either Baucom or Braswell. So Ma wasn't able to take hard times like a lot of country women could—and that's the main reason Dad come over here to Charlotte in 1904 and started us Belks off in the mill.

"Well, I was eight year old. Old enough to see that things didn't get no better. Dad knowed he'd got in a bind.

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Even if he'd wanted to try the farm agin he'd sold his all and didn't have the money to start off with agin. Y'see, he was caught. When I got to be fifteen Dad died and I had to leave school in the sixth grade and start in too, to help keep us all goin'. That's when I got

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caught. I don't know nothin' else now. Don't you see? There ain't anything else I can do. And here m' kids is a-startin'. Same old thing all over agin. Yet they got to, to keep us all goin'. Onct you get in it....” and then he stops, wordless.

There were eleven kids but three of them died. They started coming three years after the marriage with Martha. Both of them marvel at how easy those three years were.

“Bout all I can remember is that John wanted to go to the war. Bound to fight, he was. But his old bad lef' foot kep' him out. Them doctors made him hop all over the room on his right foot and he hop just fine, but come time to hop on his lef', he fell right down on his face. I sure was glad.”

That was Martha. She was glad John had to “stay put and not bust up the only real home she'd ever had.” Of her early life, Martha says, “Where'd we live? Why, we lived in a waggin. A waggin a-movin' from one mill to another. We'd not no more'n get good settled in Pac'let before we'd up and move to Union. Get settled good there and, whoosh! —off to Pac'let. And then back agin. We never did have nothin'.

“Out of six kids only two of us lived—my brother Luther and me. I never will forget my little brother Richard. He's 4 buried in Pac'let. Ma set him down on the floor one day while she went in the back yard to look at a storm cloud a-comin' up, and he crawls over under the kitchen table and gets a-holt of a pickle jar full o' coal oil and drinks it. When Ma gets back to the house he's awmost strangled to death. Then he did die. They say it wasn't the stranglin' that kilt him, though. It was the coal oil pizened his mouth. You see, he was a-teethin' and it pizened his gums.

“I can remember another one that's buried at Union. His name was William. I wasn't very old then but I can remember that it was just a child's disease that kilt him. He had the hives.”

“Well, Pa, he's settled now,” she says with finality.

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Pa—H. C. Payne—is settled. At 66 he is too old to work in the mills and lives with Martha and son-in-law John.

“I don't mind bein' settled so much, now I'm a-gettin' old,” he says. “I always was kinda shif'less, but you get too old even to be shif'less and triflin'. I he'p all I can around the house. I don't mind so much.

“No reason I should be so shif'less, but I always has been, somehow. I was one of nine young'uns and they all done well but me. Lived on a farm over in Alamance County. Pretty good farm, 's farms go, if you like a farm. I don't.

“I always was devilish. Mischeevous. Speshly in school. I'd get blamed for ever'thing got done. Least it seemed so to me. I didn't care, though. I remember a schoolteacher we 5 use-ta have. Her name was Miss Laura Wilson. I never will forget Miss Laura.

“We use-ta have a wood-choppin' detail ever' day to go out and chop up enough wood for the day in the schoolroom stove. Well, she use-ta see that I was on it ever' day. One day a kid name Luther Brown and me was a-comin' in and Luther up and chunked a green walnut at me and knocked out a window-light.

“Miss Laura, she run up and yanked me into the room by the ear and said, ' You broke out that window, Henry Payne!' I was so excited I yelled at her, 'You're a l'ar!' ”

““You tellin' me I told a lie?’ she hollers back. And I kind of come to and knowed what I'd said. To the schoolteacher!

““You are a l'ar,' I says to her, scared and trying to grin cute. 'L'ar-ra. Laura. Laura Wilson.' Well, she hadta laugh.”

Here old man Henry goes into wheezing whoops at the recollection of his wit. The whole family laughs. It is one of their favorite stories.

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In 1888 he ran away from home and joined the Navy. "They never tried to make a sailor outa me," he said. "I was in the kitchen a-peelin' p'tatoes the whole four years. One hitch was enough for me! But then—and if this don't beat all—didn't I go down to South Carolina and marry me a girl name Lily Kitchens! Her old man was a train engineer and he never wanted us to, but we done it. Her people kind of figgered I was a rounder, I guess. They wasn't far wrong, neither."

"Aw, Pa ain't so awful as he makes out," Martha put in.

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"I never will forget when we lived out from Pac'let at a place called Possum Holler. A fam'ly livin' right close t' us caught the black-tongue fever. Natchly ever'body was scairt to death of it and nobody wouldn't go near the house. One afternoon Pa was out in the backyard a-choppin' wood and all of a sudden out from acrost the field we could hear this woman a-screamin'. Pa didn't do a thing but stick his axe in the choppin' block and tell Ma that fever or no fever he was a-goin down there and he'p them sick people. And he went!

"When he got down there he found two of the kids in one bed already dead. Pa said it was a turrible sight. Two more of the kids and the old man was piled up in another bed with their faces a-turnin' black and their tongues swole outa their heads and jus' as black as yore hat. They was a-chokin' to death and they wasn't much Pa and the woman could do for 'em. The woman couldn't do much but scream noway.

"That night both the kids and the old man died. Pa went up to the Pac'let health officer next day and tole him 'bout the five dead ones down at that house, and, you know, nobody but Pa and the health officer and a doctor from a nearby town would go into that house and get them pore things out and bury 'em. And I want you to know Pa never caught a thing! But of course he didn't know he wasn't gonna when he went there."

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Martha is glad that her father lives with them now. "He's so crazy 'bout the littlest one I don't hafta 'tend him none," she says.

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It was in 1918 that the first child arrived. John had wanted a boy and was intensely disappointed that it was a girl. They called her Ruby, and John says now he wouldn't swap her for ten boys. The next year a boy was born and called Harold. The next year, 1920, the third child came, another boy, named Earl. During Martha's confinement with that one little Harold caught a cold that turned into pneumonia and caused his death soon after Earl's birth.

In 1922 William was born. They called him Billy. He died at eight months, and Martha says it was because something went wrong with his teething and his gums were poisoned. Another boy was born in 1924. He is called by his initials, R. D.

By 1926 the Belks had been married eleven years and, as John puts it, had gotten into a rut. He had been more fortunate than most of the workers because of his mechanical ability. Whenever there were shut-downs John was retained at least part-time to overhaul the machines and keep them in repair. Once his salary got up to \$18 a week, but for the most part it ranged from \$12.50 to \$15.

Martha had always had her babies at home but that year another one was coming and some one told her of a room in the Mercy General Hospital furnished by the Kiwanis Club for people who could pay very little or nothing at all. So the sixth confinement was the first in which either Martha or the child received adequate professional care. The baby was a girl and they called her Dorothy.

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Martha was so delighted with the whole affair that when her time approached in 1930 she engaged the room again. John borrowed \$25 from "the man in the mill office" for the event

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and he and Martha “studied over what to call it” and agreed on a name for either a boy or a girl.

The hospital called him away from his machine at the mill and told his “it” was twin boys.

“I just turned 'round and went back to the mill office and the man says, 'Why, John, you just borrowed \$25 and now you want fifteen more!' I just says 'Twins'. So the man says, 'My God, here, take this twenty-five.’”

They were at a loss as to what to name the “other one.” The doctor, hearing the discussion, said, “Why not Amos and Andy?” Martha and John were delighted with the suggestion and that is what the boys were named.

Some one at the hospital, unknown to Martha and John, wrote the team of radio comedians who had inspired the doctor and told them about their namesakes. It was the proudest day in the lives of the Belks when each of the twins received a silver baby-spoon, engraved with his name, from the original Amos and Andy. Since then on every birthday and at Christmas the twins receive a gift from the radio pair, accompanied each time by a toothbrush and a tube of toothpaste.

Today, at eight years, the boys look healthy. Amos is in the second grade at school and Andy is in the first. Andy is not backward, but he could not be promoted to the second grade 9 because his eyes are bad.

“It's a shame,” Martha says, “We ain't got no money to take him to a eye doctor and get him fixed so's he could read and write like other kids. I get awful worried about it but they ain't a thing we can do. I got him some cheap glasses but I think they're too strong. Sometimes when he wears 'em a while he says they make his eyes run like he was cryin'.”

When the twins were nearly two another girl was born. Martha went again to the hospital. This time she called the child Mary Ann, for one of the nurses who was very pretty. In 1933

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another girl, Violet, was born, but two weeks after they came home from the hospital the baby died of whooping cough.

The Kiwanis room was an old story to Martha by this time. In 1934 her eleventh was born. Even at birth he had a mane of yellow curls, so they called him Gene Raymond, after a wavy-haired blonde movie actor. But now, at four years, he has discarded his movie name for one he hears daily on a local hillbilly broadcast. Ask him who he is and he'll answer, "I'm a Hot Shot Elmer and a Jews-harp John." Everyone who knows him calls his Hotshot. He is a beautiful child and the pet of the neighborhood, particularly of Grandpa Payne.

Looking backward, John and Martha think of 1930 as the toughest year of all. Following the birth of the twins Martha was in bed twenty-one weeks. John tried to keep working and let the children care for her as well as they could—there was no money for hired help—but she grew steadily worse and required constant attention and John as was forced to stay away from 10 work "seven long weeks." During that time the only family income was the few dollars Ruby could bring in for doing odd jobs at the mill—at the age of twelve.

At last there was no food in the house, no money for Martha's medicine, no milk for the infant twins. In desperation John went to the Associated Charities and asked for food. When the interviewer found that a member of the family had occasional work—twelve-year-old Ruby—he was refused assistance. His four mile walk back, empty-handed, to his sick wife and his hungry family, and with his pride humbled for nothing, was the bitterest hour he ever knew.

"You nor nobody," he says, "won't ever know how I felt about them people at that place when they tole as I couldn't get anything to eat just because my little girl had been tryin', and was still tryin', to save me, her Dad, from havin' to go down there and beg. Right now I hate 'em. I hate to set down here and talk about it. I start to gettin' mad and feelin' like I did that day. If it hadn't been for the Super down at the mill I don't know what we'd done. He

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dug down in his pocket four weeks and sent us groceries. He was a fine man. I sure did hate to see him leave the mill last year.”

Grandma Payne died in 1932 and soon afterwards Grandpa was “laid off” at the mill because of his age. There was nothing for him to do but go to Martha's. Today he receives \$6 a month Old Age Assistance and he gives it to Martha to help feed the ten people in the family. She needs it.

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“Since Ruby went and got married 'bout a month ago,” she said, “we been havin' it pretty tough. John don't make but \$15 a week and so Earl, our oldest boy, 's gone to work to sorta he'p out, but he ain't gettin' it reg'lar. Jus' one or two days a week, only 'bout enough to keep him in clothes and give us a couple dollars now and then.

“So outa that fifteen and Pa's six a month we hafta pay house rent, that's a dollar and fifteen cents a week, feed ten people, pay in surance, clothe all of us, and try to pay our honest debts, and I'll tell you, you can't do it. Why, right now, cold as it is, there's them kids and not a one of 'em's got a stitcha underwear. Course they don't wear it in summer. But now! Most of 'em's a-needin' shoes and sweaters and coats and things.

“It use-ta be we could count on 'bout \$5 a week from Ruby, but now her and Herbert Newell—he's a young furniture repair man and her husband now—why, they're a-keepin' house over at his mother's.

“One thing that does help out a heap is the stuff I raised out in the garden patch behind the house las' summer. I canned up a lot and it sure is a help. Pa, he spends a lot of time out there in the garden in the summer, and I 'low our patch was the nicest one in this row o' houses.

“I wisht he could borry some more carpenter's tools so's he could fix up the cracks in that back room and 'round them doors and windows all around. Why, that back room where

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him 12 and the boys sleeps is jus' like bein' outdoors. Pa and Earl sleeps in one bed and Amos 'n' Andy and R. D. in the other'n.

"In the next room we ain't got nothin' but one bed and that's where Mary Ann and Dorothy and Hotshot sleeps. John and me sleeps in this front room. It's been mighty cold these last nights and it takes a plenty o' cover. We ain't got enough. They ain't any heaters in this house, jus' these fireplaces.

"There's two rooms on that short side the house. That'n off the front porch 's the one Ruby use-ta have. It's the only one looks like anything. It's got in it the bedroom suit she bought 'fore she got married and she jus' ain't moved it yet. She was goin' to get her a rug but she never did. We ain't got a rug in this whole house and it's mighty hard to keep these ole wo'-out floors clean with so many kids trompin' in and out.

"We did have some pretty furniture onct but times got hard and we hadta let 'em take it back. Now anybody can see we ain't got a thing whatsoever. Except the radio. It's awmost paid for. I couldn't do without that. Let me miss a day outa Myrt and Marge or Big Sister or Dan Harding's Wife and I get right sick.

"I need a stove pretty bad. That ole oil stove is wo'-out and it sure is hard to stay in the house and cook on it when the windows have to be down. It stinks so bad. But leastways we got a eatin' table we can all set down to at the same time. Pa made it for me las' summer.

"That icebox there was give to us by a man lives right 13 behind us. He's all time comin' over here Sundays to get John to cut his hair, and so one Sunday he brought three o' the kids over and tole John if he would cut hair for all of 'em he'd give him that icebox.

"There's always somebody comin' by on Sunday mornin'. Nobody 'round here goes to church. The twins and Mary Ann goes, but I think they know some kids that goes regular

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to the Church of God and that's howcome they goes. John and me do sometimes, not very often. I never was a hand to take much part in religion. Guess I oughta.

"Las' Sunday when that man come to get his hair cut he give us a 'larm clock. John don't never charge no money for cuttin'. He jus' tells the boys to buy him a bottle o' beer onct in a while. Not that John's a drinkin' man, no sirree. He's as good a man 'bout drinkin' and his money as I'd ever want. Why, on Thursdays when he goes to work in the evenin', he gets his money and I send Dorothy, our twelve-year-old, over there after it, and he sends every penny of it home by her.

"He works on the second shif' and runs the tyin' machine. If you ain't ever been around a mill you prob'ly don't know much 'bout the tyin' machine, but John says it's one the hardest in the mill to work and you sure gotta know how it's done to run it. He's good on machinery. That 1927 model Pony-act (Pontiac) out there in the front yard runs jus' as good as you'd want, he keeps it in such good shape. We use it mos'ly for haulin' groceries and coal, 'count of the gas, but John and the fellows goes huntin' in it the right time o' year."

Martha's clothes are sagging and shapeless, but so is Martha. She weighs 215 pounds and wears no corset. She settles in a chair and looks as if she means to be there permanently, but every few minutes she pulls herself up to settle a dispute.

"I'm always havin' to slap somebody's pants," she said. "I try to go easy on Dorothy, our oldest girl. She's kinda puny. The nurse over at the school come here last week to talk to me about her. She's underweight and they think maybe she'd oughta be in the Sunshine School. They give 'em a lotta milk and rest there. I'd be glad, if they can get her in.

"But you take Mary Ann. To look at her you'd think she was sickly, but even if she is six year old and don't weigh but 36 pounds, she ain't been sick a day in her life. Jus' as rowdy as any boy in the house. You prob'ly noticed we got a quar'ntine on the front porch. Amos and Hotshot has the whoopin' cough, but they're gettin' 'long all right. I'm lettin' the others

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go on to school. I don't think they could give it to any the other kids if they ain't got it themself.

“There's a lotta sickness 'round here. Between 'tendin' to my own and he'ppin' out the neighbors with theirs, seem like it don't leave much time for anything else. That woman down the street had the too-bercalosis. Ever'body else was scairt to go 'round her, but I figgered if Pa didn't ketch the 15 black-tongue fever that time I wouldn't ketch this. They wasn't anybody to look out for her whilst her husband was at the mill so I been goin' there. She died 'bout three weeks ago. It sure was pitiful. She was the purtiest woman I b'lieve I ever seen. Coal-black hair and coal-black eyes. You know, she stayed in bed so long they had to cut her hair off, and it jus' curled up on the ends and sorta covered 'round her face. She had a face jus' like a baby's. I sure hated to see her die.

“You know, it's gettin' so ever' time old Doc Gelland gets a call 'round here and they ain't nobody to he'p out, he'll say, 'Go get Ole Fat.' That's what he calls me. But I don't mine.”

She doesn't mind. She chuckled as if it were some other woman the doctor called Old Fat.

One thing Martha longs for is a bathroom.

“Lord, how I wisht the Company'd put one in,” she said. “It sure is trouble draggin' in a warsh tub tryin' to get all them kids and ourselves clean.”

“Well, they done well givin' us them brick outhouses las' year, to my way o' thinkin', old man Payne answered. 'Them dern boys'd turn the whole row o' wooden ones over ever' Hallowe'en. The Company sure fixed that with them brick ones.”

He cackled at the Company's cleverness. He was plainly pleased at no longer having the annual job of setting up the wooden one, and seemed unconcerned over the trouble of taking a bath.

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Once in a while Martha works in the mill a day or two 16 at a time when an operator is out because of sickness or trouble. She does it to be obliging, but John hates even that.

"Mill?" he said. "Look at Grandpa Payne. He's had 46 years of it, and now look at him. He never did make enough to live on when he was workin', and when he gets a little old, what do they do? Throw him out.

"Here I am ever since 1911 in one. 'What have I got?

"Mind you, tomorrow all they got to do is say the word and I'd hafta get outa this house o' theirs. I have been preachin' this to my kids, and I have been tryin' to keep 'em out, but it looks like Earl is goin' to be bullheaded and get in it jus' like I and my Daddy did. And when you onct get in it ....."